

## **Cheaper than therapy** by Jancys-Blue-Bayou

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**Summary:** That was one night. An incredibly important night, but only one night. Nancy doesn't just want to be there for them for one night, she wants to always be there for them. Hence why she knocks on the door with a purse full of bullets and a gun and a plan to get Joyce to talk and ease her mind.

## Cheaper than therapy

She opens her closet and digs out the shoebox from where it's hidden under some old dresses. Opening it she takes out the revolver and boxes of ammunition and stuffs it all into her purse. She's mulled this over in her head all morning and has reached the conclusion that it's the best idea she's got. She was going to borrow her mother's car but she's out running errands, while dad took his to Milwaukee for a work conference, so she resolves to dig her bike out of the garage. At least it's a mild winter's day. It's a Saturday, Jonathan's working a dayshift so he can get the evening off to be with her, Will is with Mike in the basement of her own house, the Party has a sleepover planned for tonight. Which makes this the perfect time for her to go over and talk to Joyce.

She's worried about her. Jonathan's worried about her. It's been almost a month and a half since all hell broke loose. Since she and Jonathan got justice against the Lab, since Bob died, since Eleven closed the gate, since they got the Shadow Monster out of Will. Will's doing better and better every day. It's such a joy to see him happy, smiling and laughing. It's so good to see the relief on Jonathan's face too, he's so happy to see his brother happy. But Joyce on the other hand... Jonathan confides in her now, a lot. He's told her about how he's worried about his mom, how he tries to take care of her but how Joyce's mental state is a continuous worry for him. Bob's death hit her hard. On top of that, Joyce having to watch as her darling son got possessed by a demon from another dimension? Talk about a perfect storm of just fucked up things to deal with. Jonathan is there for his mother, like he always is, but he's told her he feels like his mom is still bottling it up, still putting on a brave face and trying to not burden him with it. The thought that Joyce doesn't want to burden Jonathan with it rings true to Nancy. Jonathan had to grow up so fast, had to take on so much responsibilities so young, and she knows Joyce has leaned hard on him in the past, not least during last fall, so she assumes Joyce might feel some guilt about that. It doesn't feel that wild to speculate about. After all, last fall she called the Byers house looking for Jonathan and Joyce told her to try the funeral home.

Grief, feelings of guilt and no outlet? Needless to say, she can relate to that. She wants to help Joyce. She looks up to Joyce, so much. She's amazing. Strong, smart, resourceful, tough as nails, brave, unrelenting, unwavering in the face of danger but also so full of love to give and just an unstoppable force of nature when it comes to protecting the ones she loves. She wants to be like that too. And she wants to be there for her, for them. She came home with Jonathan that night when he didn't get an answer at home anytime they tried calling, which worried them both. She went with them to the cabin because she wanted to be there for them all. Jonathan needed her, to hold onto and be held by as they faced the horrors. Just like he's been there for her. And then Joyce and Will needed her, desperately. And so she grabbed a red hot fire poker.

But that was one night. An incredibly important night, but only one night. She doesn't just want to be there for them for one night, she wants to always be there for them. Hence why she knocks on the door with a purse full of bullets and a gun and a plan to get Joyce to talk and ease her mind.

"Nancy! Hi sweetie," Joyce looks surprised when she opens the door. She also looks tired but smiles at her nonetheless. "Jonathan isn't here, he's working today."

"Hey! I know, I didn't come to see him," she smiles. "I came to see you. I mean, if you have the time..."

"Oh! Oh, of course, come in, come in," Joyce hurries to usher her inside.

"It's not a bad time?" She asks to make sure.

"No, no of course not," Joyce says, taking her coat before showing her into the kitchen.

She takes a seat at the kitchen table. Joyce hurries to take the full ashtray off of it and dump its contents in the trash.

"What's on your mind dear? Oh, do you want coffee... or tea, I have tea," Joyce asks and interrupts herself, looking in a cabinet.

"Tea sounds great," she smiles. Joyce breathes out and puts the kettle on before sitting down opposite her.

"So, how are you, are you good?"

"I'm great, how are you?" She smiles again.

"Oh you know, hanging in there. How's your mom? Oh and you and Jonathan are going out tonight right?"

"She's good! And yeah, or we might stay in, we'll see."

"Oh that's nice. So what brings you here sweetheart?"

"Well... I just wanted to check in and see how you're doing."

"Oh, I'm okay. You don't have to worry about me, sweetie."

"Well, that's the thing I... given everything I can't help but worry about everyone."

"Oh, me too but you know, I can handle it..."

"Oh I know you can, it's just... Will is doing good. And Jonathan too, we talk a lot about... everything and I think it does us both good."

"I'm so glad you two have each other."

"Thanks, I'm really glad I have him. But anyway I think... I think you're like me... and like Jonathan."

"What do you mean?" Joyce asks while standing up. The water's boiled. Soon a big cup of nice fruity tea is placed in front of her. Joyce sits down with her own mug.

"You take care of everyone else. Like Jonathan does. But I think... you carry a lot by yourself. I know what that's like. I did that for a year. Do you have anyone to speak to?" She asks, taking a sip of her beverage.

"Jonathan... but I don't want to burden him more... he already does so much..."

"I know. I understand that."

"Just with the funeral alone he was amazing... god he has way too much experience with funeral planning now..."

She nods solemnly.

"Then there's Hopper... he's... he's great but he's busy with Jane and he's not... receptive, to everything. I think. Or I don't want to discuss everything with him. With Bob and all. And with... that place, with everything he's very... pragmatic. He sees very clearly, which is great for him but I feel... like it's murky."

"The Upside Down?"

"Yeah. All of that. It's... this huge thing. This huge, enormous threat. It took my boy. Almost took him for good, twice. I can't stop thinking... is it over? Can it really be over? Jane closed the gate but... is it really that simple? Just shut a door and shut out all of our troubles? In my experience... it doesn't work like that in life... Sorry, I'm rambling."

"No, no I... I feel the same way. I think about that too. We're safe for now but... is it really forever? I mean, if El could open and close the gate... is she the only one who can do that? What if that thing... or something else in there can do it? What if there's more dimensions?"

She hadn't exactly planned on spilling out her own paranoia when her goal was to help Joyce and maybe it just plants more fears in the other woman's head but really it feels like... like they should share like this. Sharing is good. Having Jonathan to talk too has finally given her some peace of mind, and him too it seems. Joyce needs it too, but it's a two way street, sharing. And it seems to be working, Joyce nods and continues.

"Exactly! I can't stop thinking about all this... there's still so much we don't know! Hopper is very... mission oriented. Which is great but me I'm not... well he's like we'll cross that bridge when we come to it but I... think about every possible bridge we can be forced over. All the time."

"I do too. We both do, me and Jonathan. We talk about that, trying to think of it... from what we know so far, trying to think of it from all possible angles... In case something happens again. We need to be ready."

Joyce nods.

"But we can't think about it all the time. I used to, think about it constantly. But now, when me and Jonathan... it feels good to talk about it. We can talk about it but then put it aside and not think about it all day too. Be happy. For the first time in a year... I can be that."

Joyce reaches out and puts a hand on her arm.

"That makes me happy. You make Jonathan happy too. I'm so sorry you felt like that for a whole year. I'm sorry about Barbara."

"Thanks. I'm sorry about Bob."

Joyce nods slightly, looking down and drinking her tea.

"How have you been... about that?" She treads lightly.

"It's been... tough. I just feel so awful about it..."

"Why?"

"It's uh... I... mind if I smoke?"

"No, it's your house."

Joyce fiddles with the pack and a lighter. Lighting up she takes a long drag on the cigarette and remains quiet, pensive, but slightly less anxious.

"After Barb I felt... so guilty," she starts instead when Joyce doesn't continue. The other woman looks up at her with interest. "It was all my fault."

"How could it be your fault, sweetheart? That monster, that thing, took her."

"Yeah but Barb wasn't... I put her in that situation. I... I got invited to a party. At Steve's house, and I dragged her along because I didn't want to go alone. She didn't want to go, she didn't like Steve or his friends, she tried to talk some sense into me because they were... not good. But I was too blinded to see clearly... I just liked that the popular boy noticed me. And Barb came with me anyway because she's a good friend... was a good friend. Then... ugh it was so stupid. So dumb. Steve shotgunned a beer. To like, impress me. It was so lame. But he challenged me to do it too and I'm just... an idiot who has to do it then, when challenged. So I did. Then I insisted Barb try it, she didn't want to but I kept pushing and finally she was gonna do it but she accidentally cut her thumb with the knife and started bleeding. And then I went with Steve... I told Barb to go home... she told me I wasn't being myself, she knew me better than I knew myself right then. But I didn't listen, I went with Steve and... yeah. Then he fell asleep so I had to walk home alone. Maybe Barb predicted he would because she didn't go home. She waited. She waited around for me and that's when that thing took her. Because she was bleeding from the cut she only got because I was a peer pressuring idiot. I wish I had done everything differently that night. Everything."

She finishes her tale and realizes she just told Jonathan's mother about drinking and sleeping with another boy. But Joyce just looks sympathetic. And slightly confused.

"But sweetheart, you didn't know. You didn't know what was out there. You didn't even know she stuck around. You told her to go home. And you couldn't know she'd cut herself. You could never anticipate that, and you didn't know what was out there. That the cut would mean all that. If you'd been with her that thing would've just taken both of you. It's not your fault."

"Jonathan said that too..."

"He's right. It's like... he blamed himself for not being here when Will was taken, he'd picked up an extra shift. He blamed himself and I told him not too. It wasn't his fault. It would've just taken them both if he'd been there."

"I know, he told me that... I know he's right, you're right. I'm beginning to accept that now but..."

"Good. You should. It wasn't your fault, any of it. It's not like... Bob."

"How do you mean?"

"You didn't know what was out there. But I knew. I knew and I dragged Bob into it. I tried to shield from it, tried to protect him from it, I didn't tell him about it for so long but... I was just so desperate, to help Will, and to find Hopper. Will made the drawings, of the tunnels. He knew Hopper was in danger but he didn't know where. And we couldn't figure it out, me, him, your brother... we didn't know what we were looking at. Then Bob came by, I turned him away at first, I didn't want to involve him but... he was so smart. So clever. I was desperate. And so I decided. I took him inside and showed him. And he figured it out, that it was a map, and where Hopper was. And he helped me save Hop. Then those horrible lab people came, they burned the tunnels and it hurt Will, hurt him so bad we all got taken into the lab. Bob too. He was so kind, so smart. So caring. And so innocent. He wouldn't have been there... he wouldn't have known about any of it, if it wasn't for me... he would've lived if it wasn't for me."

She listens intently to Joyce's tale. She hears her out, and sees with clarity where she's wrong. Realizes maybe it was just as easy for Joyce to feel the same way after hearing her own guilt-ridden story about Barb. Maybe it's easier to see the misguided feelings of guilt in others than yourself. It makes her re-evaluate again her feelings and thoughts on Barb. She's pushed more and more to Jonathan's and Joyce's take on it. That it's not her fault. Hopefully, she can get Joyce to realize the same thing.

"No..."

"No?"

"It isn't your fault. Just like..."

"You didn't know. I knew and I dragged him into it," Joyce takes another drag of the cigarette.

"But no, you had to and... listen you had to. Mike told me about it, the map and how he figured it out. You had to get him involved, you



were trying to help Will. And save Hopper! Hopper would've died otherwise. And you didn't know you'd be taken into the lab... you didn't know you'd be trapped there. You didn't know there were goddamn Demogorgons roaming around! You couldn't predict all that stuff."

"But I knew the risks. I knew that once I got him involved in this... I opened the door for him and let him through, knowing that once I opened it for him... once you're in, you're in."

"That's not... entirely true. Mike said you just told him to find the x at first. Then he chose to come with you. And still you didn't know what would happen next, with the lab and all. And what if you hadn't ended up trapped at the lab? You didn't know that would happen, you just knew that once you told him he'd never forget that knowledge but... it'd be his own choice what to do with it. He could've just ignored it, if he wanted to. That's... that's what Steve wanted to do, but I couldn't. I think he'd still would gladly ignore it all if not for Dustin dragging him into it again. But Bob chose differently. He wanted to help. Mike said at the lab, he volunteered?"

"Yes..."

"So he knew the risks. He made his choice. He wouldn't want you to torture yourself over it. And what killed him... the only ones who's responsible for that is the lab. It's their fault. Everything. They killed Barb. They killed Bob. Jonathan told me... I had to cut myself some slack, stop blaming myself... I think... I think he's right. And I'm trying to do that. But I'll only do it if you do the same. If it's not my fault it's not yours either."

She holds Joyce's gaze and nods slightly for emphasis. She really believes these words so she really wants them to get through.

"Okay. Okay well I want you to stop blaming yourself so if that's the condition for it I guess I pretty much have to," Joyce smiles.

Now she is the one to reach out. She takes Joyce's hand.

"We're in this together. All of us. Jonathan, me, you... I've learnt way too much about grief now. Most of all that it's crushing to handle by

yourself. Let's stick together."

Joyce smiles again and squeezes her hand.

"Stick together through all of it. The grief. And whatever comes next," she continues. Joyce nods.

"Thank you, Nancy. Thanks for everything."

"Thank you."

She lets go of Joyce's hand. Finishes her tea. Joyce takes another drag before speaking again.

"So you and Jonathan talk about this? All the bad stuff."

"Yeah. We both worry, but it's easier together."

"That's good. That's real good."

"We can worry together all three though," she says with a slight smile.

"That sounds good. Slightly healthier," Joyce smiles, but then sighs. "But I don't want to just worry... I wish I could feel... some peace of mind. I can't just worry about what might happen. I want to be ready for when it does."

"I was thinking you might feel like that. I'm the same way," she smiles. "I have an idea."

She reaches into her purse and produces the revolver, putting it on the table. Joyce's eyes go wide in surprise.

"Has Hopper showed you how to shoot a gun?" She asks.

"No."

"Do you wanna learn?"

"Yes."

Joyce puts out her cigarette. They put on their coats. Before they

head out the backdoor she thinks to ask Joyce if she's got any empty cans at home. Together they corral some Campbell's from under the sink. They walk through the woods until they reach the familiar clearing, the same one where a year ago she brought a bat and a tale about life at the end of the cul-de-sac and Jonathan brought the revolver and a story about a ruined birthday and a dead rabbit. They traded stories and weapons and came out of that clearing as partners. In monster hunting, and in so much more as time would show.

She lines up the cans. Joyce has questions, of course.

"Okay so... how come you know how to shoot a gun?"

"Last year, when Jonathan and I first teamed up. I brought a bat, he brought this."

"Where did he get that?"

"Stole it from Lonnie's car after Will's funeral."

"Oh."

They step back to a sufficient firing length.

"He's a lousy shot," she grins. "He couldn't hit the cans for the life of him."

"Yeah, I can't imagine him with a gun. It's just not in him. You know, when he turned ten..."

"I know. He told me about that. That day. What an asshole, Lonnie."

"Yeah. God, he was only ten. I'm glad I gave him the Pentax after that. I won't ever be able to top that gift I think. He's much better with a camera."

"He didn't tell me about that! Gosh, I feel bad now."

"Why?"

"About the Pentax. That Steve broke it. I never wanted him to break it but god, if he got it then it's really awful, how it ended."

"Oh. Well, the one you gave him is an upgrade anyway so. He really treasures it. Don't feel bad. Especially when it wasn't you who broke it."

"Okay. Anyway, he couldn't hit the cans. I asked for it, he told me to just point and shoot. And I hit one the first try. You should've seen the look on his face. Like he'd just seen the coolest thing ever. He looked so happy," she smiles wide at the memory. That look from Jonathan, right after she hit the first can, the way he smiled at her... she'll never forget that. How it made her feel. Like she could do anything.

"Well, you are that to him. The coolest," Joyce smiles.

"Hm, he's not too bad himself," she blushes. "Anyway, so I guess I was just a natural. I got the rest of the cans down and we decided to switch, I took the gun, he took the bat."

"And the rest is history..." Joyce smirks.

"Right," she grins, putting bullets into the chamber. "So. I mean he may not be able to hit anything himself but his advice still works. Just point and shoot," she says.

She takes aim on the can furthest to the left and pulls the trigger. The loud bang is followed by the soft thud of the can hitting the ground. God that felt good. To pull a trigger. It's been so long.

"That's all there is to it," she turns to Joyce, who's watching intently. "Oh, and watch the recoil. Just lock your arms, keep it firm and steady and you'll be fine."

Joyce nods. She hands over the revolver. She watches closely as Joyce readies herself and takes aim on the next can in line.

The shot rings out. The can stands still. Bark flies out from the tree directly behind it. Joyce looks disappointed.

"Hey that's not bad," she encourages, crouching down and squinting to assess where the bullet hit the tree. "Just a little lower next time. Try another one."

Joyce nods and moves onto the third can. Readies herself again. Locks arms, takes a deep breath, holds it, points, shoots. Bang. Thud.

"Nice shot!" She exclaims.

Joyce lowers the gun and looks at her. She recognizes the feeling strewn across Joyce's face. It's a mixture of surprise and an exhilarating pride in oneself, over the personal accomplishment. Does a gun solve all problems? No. But can it in the right hands solve some? Yes. Is it silly to take such pride in your ability to discharge a weapon? Is it just a false sense of security, especially considering she's already tried to face down dangers impenetrable by bullets? Maybe. But she'll take a false sense of security over no sense of security, at least when it also comes with the side effect of making her feel slightly more powerful. Confident. She's good with a gun. She likes to be good at things. Plus, who's to say what dangers they may face in the future? It may turn out be a practical applicable solution to problems for them both.

Most of all, the look on Joyce's face is the best look she's seen on it all day and that's all she really hoped to accomplish today. To make Joyce feel like that instead of wallowing in guilt and worry.

"Get the other ones now," she instructs. Joyce smiles, nods and then turns back to the line of cans, focus returning.

After Joyce has knocked down the last cans she hands the revolver back.

"Wanna go again?" She asks, getting the box of ammunition out of her coat pocket.

Joyce nods giddily and goes to put the cans back up while she puts a new round into the chamber.

Joyce gets down all the cans the next time. She then takes a turn too – it's been so long after all. She also shows Joyce how to reload. By the time they've collected the cans and she's put away the empty revolver in her pocket they both feel lighter than before.

"It's cheaper than therapy," she jokes. "And now at least you know

how to use a gun, if it will come to that in the future."

"Yeah," Joyce nods. "That felt good."

"I'm glad."

On the trek back to the house they pass by a tree. It looks like any other tree, but she will always know it's this tree. Maybe her gaze lingers on it a bit too long, maybe she slows her step a bit too much so it's noticeable, because Joyce asks.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. Just... he pulled out of that tree," she points it out.

Joyce's mouth forms into a slightly O-shape as the realization dawns on her.

"The portal was right there. I crawled through it and suddenly I was there, in that place. And the monster was there and I was sure I was gonna die. Then I heard his voice and he guided me back. He pulled me back through."

Joyce nods.

"He's good like that. He's really good at saving. Protecting."

"Yeah, he really is," Joyce agrees.

When they get back to the house, Jonathan is there, his shift at work having just ended. He looks surprised when the two of them come in through the backdoor.

"Hey!"

"Hey... what's going on?"

"Oh nothing, Nancy came over so we just spent some quality time together," Joyce explains.

She herself opts for quickly brandishing the revolver in her pocket as an explanation. Jonathan's eyes go big.

"What happened?" He worriedly asks.

"Nothing," she reassures him, coming over and giving him a quick kiss and a hug. "Just some shooting practice."

"Okay..."

"Your mom's a natural too," she smiles.

"Uh-huh," Jonathan murmurs, still looking confusedly between them.

"We just talked, about things. And I needed to clear my mind and Nancy had the perfect way for it," Joyce elaborates. "Thanks again sweetie," she steps over and hugs her.

"Anytime."

They opt to stay in rather than going out that night. Cooking dinner together with Joyce and watching an old rerun of Casablanca on TV instead. Joyce remains in a good mood and she can see how it calms Jonathan. When Joyce busies herself with the dishes, firmly insisting they shouldn't help her, she fills Jonathan in more. He looks a little awestruck when she's finished telling him the gist of her talk with Joyce and about going out to shoot.

"You're the best," he murmurs, running the fingers on his left hand through her hair, playing with it like he started to do as soon as she sat up straighter and turned to face him before telling him about it.

"It's really nothing," she shrugs, inching in closer to him. She loves the feeling of his fingers running through her hair but at the same time misses his arm around her shoulder holding her really close.

"It's everything," he insists before kissing her.

"Jonathan," she starts in a low voice after their lips break apart from the sweet kiss. "I know that I can't have you without also having your family. It's either all or nothing. And I want it all," she tells him with sincerity.

He gives her that awestruck look again. Then he kisses her again, deeper this time.

"And I want you. I care about you. I love you," he murmurs.

Her heart skips a beat at the last words. He hasn't said that before. She hasn't said it. But she's felt it. By God, she's felt it. And by the look of it, he feels it now.

"I care about you. And your family. I love you," she tells him.

He kisses her again. She can feel his lips smiling into it. When they break apart she puts her arms around his neck and hugs him as close as she possibly can.

"And your family," she adds in a whisper by his ear. His strong arms pull her even closer somehow.